

Literature (Middle East)

By [Najwa al-Qattan](#)

Summary

This article provides an overview of 20th century Syrian/Lebanese literature on the Great War. It argues that the primary focus of this literature is on the famine that decimated the civilian population of the region during the war. It suggests that the impact of the devastation on everyday life helps to explain the language, genres, and tropes used by 20th century authors, particularly of non-narrative genres such as poetry and *zajal* (vernacular poetry).

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Introduction

This article focuses on the Syrian and Lebanese literature on the Great War.¹ The war left a lasting impact on the region in the form of political remapping and colonial control; it also decimated the civilian population at home. Although removed from the military campaigns of the Suez and [Gallipoli](#), Syrians were conscripted into the Ottoman military or forced into war-related *corvée*. On the home front, the absence of men (and labor) only compounded [food](#) shortages and led to widespread famine. Hunger enabled a myriad of [diseases](#) (typhoid, typhus, and cholera, among others) and became acute by 1915 due to a combination of natural events (multiple locust swarms and unusually cold and snowy winters) and human causes, including the Entente blockade of the [Eastern Mediterranean](#), Ottoman wartime requisitioning and monetary policies, and local hoarding and [profiteering](#). The famine led to the death of 300,000 civilians and caused profound moral and social dislocation. The arrival of Armenian survivors of [genocide](#) and forced marches intensified both the food crisis and the impending sense of doom. At the same time, [Ahmed Cemal Pasha \(1872-1922\)](#), the military governor of the region, brought political violence in the form of imprisonment, exile, and

hangings of the “[Martyrs](#)” (*shuhadaʿ*) – the scores of men who were publicly executed in 1915 and 1916 in Damascus and Beirut.

The Literature on Civilian Suffering

In Syrian literature on the Great War, it is civilians rather than political martyrs or fallen soldiers who occupy center-stage. Seldom mentioned in the literary works (see below), the “Martyrs” dominate non-literary genres such as political memoirs and nationalist narratives of the Great War, and they were [officially commemorated](#) in the naming of public squares and a national holiday on 6 May in both Lebanon and Syria. In contrast, Syrian soldiers who lost their lives in the war effort were not commemorated at home, and there is little in Syria that resembles the [Cult of the Fallen Soldier](#). Syrian soldiers – forcefully conscripted provincial citizens of a combatant state that lost the war, their retreat chaotic, with many deserters and [prisoners of war](#) – were lost to memory. Traces of their efforts can be found on tombstones at Gallipoli, a handful of memoirs, and a mention here and there in the literature.²

Contrary to the soldiers and martyrs whose traces in the literature are rather faint, civilian suffering, or rather the famine, is the central story in the literary response to the war. Syrian and Lebanese authors and poets wrote about their experience even as the war was being fought and continued to do so over the course of the 20th century. Several important literary contributions were made by Syrian immigrants in [Egypt](#) and the [United States](#). Broadly speaking, the literature written on the war comprises several, sometimes overlapping, genres: [poetry](#), *zajal* (vernacular poetry), plays, and novels/memoirs. Several sources straddle multiple genres (memoirs/histories) or combine them (such as historical works that break into poetry and/or insert poetry and songs in their texts).

Wartime Literature

The experience of the Great War was articulated in many works of *zajal* and poetry, most of which were written during the war. Examples of wartime *zajal* include: Rashid Assaf, “Barley Bread” (“*Khibz shir*”); Yusuf Francis al-Birri, “*Safarbarlik*”; Emile Lahhud, “The Coffin Seller”; Yusuf Shalhoub, “The Monster of Starvation” (“*Ghul al-majaa*”); and an untitled work by [Asad Khoury al-Faghghali \(1894-1937\)](#). Among the poems written during the war are three by [Beshara Abdallah al-Khouri \(1884-1968\)](#), one of Lebanon’s most eminent poets: “1914”, “The Incident of the Counterfeit Riyal” (“*Hikayat al-riyal al-muzayyaf*”), and a third untitled poem; “1917” by Milhem Hawi; and an untitled poem by Amin Bek Nasir al-Din. Asad Khalil Daghir’s *The History of the Great War in Poetry (Tarikh al-harb al-kubra shicran)*, published in Cairo in 1919, includes “A Salute to Lebanon” and “A Love Poem to Lebanon” [“*Munajat Lubnan*”]

presented as songs; a poem (*qasida*), “Nostalgia for Lebanon” (“al-Tihnan ila Lubnan”) and “The Liberation of Syria” (“Tahrir Suriyya”). Among the most evocative works, penned in the United States, are “Brother” (“Akhi”) by [Mikhā’il Nu’aymah \(1889-1988\)](#); “Shroud Them” by [Nasib Arida \(1887-1946\)](#); and [Jibran Khalil Jibran’s \(1883-1931\)](#) “Dead Are My People”.

Although not literary works in the strict meaning of the word, I include below several wartime publications that offer more than the history/memoir material suggested by their titles. The authors of these works either insert or break into poetry, or include wartime snippets of memoirs and apocryphal stories, particularly when dealing with the famine: *The Comprehensive Book about the War (Kitab al-harb al-kabir)* edited by Salim George Shehadeh, New York 1917; Jirjis al-Maqdisi, *The Greatest War in History (Azam harb fi al-tarikh)*, Beirut 1918; Antun Yamin, *Lebanon during the War: The Memory of the Events and Injustices in Lebanon during the Global War (Lubnan fi al-harb: dhikra al-hawadith wa-l-mazalim fi Lubnan fi al-harb al-umumiyya, 1914-1918)*, Beirut 1919; Butrus Khuweiri, *Travels in Syria during the World War, 1916: Dangers, Horrors, and Wonders (Al-Rihla al-suriyya fi al-harb al-umumiyya, 1916: Akhtar wa-ahwal wa acajib)*, Cairo 1921; Ibrahim al-Aswad, *Enlightening the Mind on the History of Lebanon (Tanwir al-azhan fi tarikh Lubnan)*, Beirut 1925; and Bishara al-Buwari, *The Four Years of the War (Arba sini al-harb)*, New York 1926.

Examples of Wartime Poetry and Zajal

“Shroud Them,” a poem by Nasib Arida, written in 1916:

Shroud them,

Bury them,

Lay them in coffins down the deep grave.

Then leave at once without weeping,

For they are dead and will not wake.

Their honor trampled

Their land plundered

Some were hanged

But no one thundered

Why then shed torrential tears?

A people without courage reaps only death as its reward

Let history fold over the page

And from its book erase

This tale of weakness and disgrace.

Revenge, shame, fire

The horror has made us all so brave

But moved us only to narrate.³

“Safarbarlik”, a *zajal* piece written by Yusuf Francis al-Birri in 1917:

Oh messenger, spread this missive among mankind,

Tell them to repeat it until the end of time:

Of events no one has recorded, their history untold.

Its author intent on writing till it's known around the world:

Death is intent on all of us,

Scores of funerals every day.

The dead are worthless, buried like beasts,

Most are dead, the rest will follow suit.

In a few months' time, Lebanon's death will be complete.

Desperate villages where starvation kills young and old,

Where children roam the streets like prey,

With even good people in pursuit.⁴

Post-war Literature

Over the course of the 20th century, Syrian and Lebanese authors produced *zajal*, novels, and

plays dealing with the war. Examples of poetry and *zajal*, all written in the 1970s, include Asad al-Sabali, "Al-Batrak Antun Uraida"; Wadi Said al-Riyashi, "Epic Poetry Describing the First World War"; Musa Zughaib, "The First Martyrs"; Elias al-Farran, "Hanging from the Noose"; and Hanna Khuweiri, "Watch the Merchants, Deranged by Greed". In addition to [Tawfiq Yusuf Awwad's \(1911-1989\)](#) well-known 1939 novel, *The Loaf (Al-Raghif)*, Syrian authors produced several plays and novels/memoirs centered on the war, among them, Samih al-Zein, *May 6: The story of the Martyrs of the Nation (6 Ayyar: Qissat shuhada' al-watan)*, 1966; Hanna Mina, *Fragments of Memory: A Story of a Syrian Family*, 1975; Abdul-Fattah Ruwas Qalaji, *Urs halabi wa-hikayat min Safarbarlik. A Trilogy: The Engagement; The Wedding; The Sorrow*, 1993; Nadia al-Ghazzi, *Shirwal Barhum. Ayyam min Safarbarlik*, 1993; [Mamduh Udwan \(1941-2005\)](#), *Safarbarlik 0: Ayyam al-ju* (a play in the vernacular), 1994; Siham Tergeman, *Daughter of Damascus*, 1994; Mamduh Udwan, *Safarbarlik 2: al-Ghul, Jamal Basha al-Saffah*, 1996.

In addition, poetry, anecdotes, and apocryphal stories about the war appear in the following publications: Ibrahim Naum Kanan, *Lebanon in the Great War: 1914-1918 (Lubnan fi al-harb al-kubra: 1914-1918)*, Beirut 1974; Ibrahim Khalil Awwad, *From the Period of the Mutassariffiya to Independence: A Memoir (Min ahd al-Mutassariffiya ila ahd al-istiqlal: Mudhakkirat*, Beirut 1991; Khalid al-Lahham (ed.), *Beirut in Popular Memory (Beirut fi al-dhakira al-shabiyya)*; [Anis Frayha \(1902\)](#), *Before I Forget (Qabla an ansa)*, Beirut 1979; and [Nicola Ziadeh \(1907-2006\)](#), "A First-Person Account of the First World War in Greater Syria", Beirut 2006.

Conclusion: Understanding the Literature

The Syrian literature on the war is not extensive compared to the literary outpouring across Europe and North America. Although the number of literary pieces, which focus exclusively on the war (and are strictly-speaking "war-literature") is small, the Great War is a conspicuous theme and sometimes a trope in novels and poetry written decades after the war. There is no doubt that low literacy rates and the relatively young genre of the Arabic novel (particularly compared to poetry) in the early 20th century account for the thinness of the record; however, there are other factors that help to shed light both on this issue and on the genres and forms that authors chose when describing the war.

First, for civilians who, in the words of an eyewitness, stood at "the brink of the abyss",⁵ the famine was primarily defined by searing shame as well as incomprehensible death, thus presenting challenges to both language and memory. As described in poetry and eyewitness accounts, the hunger drove people to scavenge in piles of garbage like animals and to consume grass, locusts, carcasses, and corpses. The famine transformed the social

landscape, filling the roads with the dead and the dying, and upended familial and maternal bonds in the form of absent fathers, [orphans](#), widowed mothers, [prostitute](#) mothers, even cannibal mothers. As repeated in the sources themselves, humiliating and dehumanizing experiences are not easily articulated and resist being recorded and remembered.⁶

Second, the experience of the war complicated narrativity. Syrian civilians were for the most part removed from imperial politics and from personal investment in a heroic war. For them, there was no meaning or consolation in dying of hunger for their country. The absence of discursive meaning to the war experience finds a formal parallel in, or is a function of, war-induced disruptions to narrative time, and may help to explain why it is in non-narrative forms such as poetry, *zajal*, and apocryphal stories that the famine is remembered.

Third, unsurprisingly, writers on the war deploy a language rich in food-centered tropes to describe the ruptures that the starvation occasioned. Thus, food provides insight into a time when identity itself appeared literally to rest on the palate: when people became animals and cannibals; women's bodies and children's corpses became commodities. These discourses also speak of a breakdown in the family even as the family becomes the primary vehicle for this memory. In many of the accounts, such stories are often framed as family tales, "stories my father told me," whereas in the literary accounts, they are plotted as stories of engagements, weddings, and funerals. Rather than appeal to an imagined political community, the stories they tell are, by and large, neither national nor even communal, but rather emotive and familial.

Finally, as is the case of many deeply disruptive historical events, the Syrian Great War (also dubbed, "The War of Starvation" (*Harb al-majaa*), had a name: *Safarbarlik*. Meaning "travel by land" in Ottoman Turkish, and initially used to designate "conscription", it was unmoored from its first usage and quickly became a catchword referencing all the suffering and misery that Syrian civilians endured during the Great War, and particularly the famine. Already in use in several poems and *zajals* written during the war, the term endured as a potent symbol of starvation that came to define the war generation in the eyes of their children and grandchildren for the rest of the century.⁷

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Notes

1. This article does not discuss the mostly understudied wartime literature produced in Egypt, Palestine, and Iraq. On Iraq, see Khoury, Dina Rizk: Ambiguities of the Modern: The Great War in the Memoirs and Poetry of the Iraqis, in Liebau, Heike et al. (eds.): The

- World in World Wars: Experiences, Perceptions and Perspectives from Africa and Asia, Leiden 2010, pp. 313-40; on Palestine, see Tamari, Salim: Year of the Locusts. A Soldier's Diary and the Erasure of Palestine's Ottoman Past, Berkeley 2011. ↑
2. Yamin, Antun: Lubnan fi-l-harb. Dhikra al-hawadith wa-l-mazalim fi Lubnan fi-l-harb al-umumiyya, 1914-1918 [Lebanon during the War: The Memory of the Events and Injustices in Lebanon during the Global War], 2 vols., Beirut 1919; Tergeman, Siham: Yamal al-Sham [Daughter of Damascus], Damascus 1969. ↑
 3. Arida, Nasib in Badawi, Mustafa: Mukhtarat min al-Shir al-Hadith [Selections of Modern Poetry], Beirut 1969, pp. 111-2. All translations in this article are the author's. ↑
 4. al-Birri, Yusuf Francis in al-Khuweiri, Antoine Butrus: Tarikh al-zajal al-lubnani [A History of Lebanese Zajal], Sarba 2011, p. 195. ↑
 5. al-Aswad, Ibrahim: Tanwir al-azhan fi tarikh Lubnan [Enlightening the Mind on the History of Lebanon], Beirut 1925, pp. 68. ↑
 6. Khoury, Elias: The Necessity to Forget-and to Remember, in: Banipal Magazine of Modern Arab Literature 12/5 (2001). ↑
 7. al-Qattan, Najwa: Safarbarlik. Ottoman Syria and the Great War, in: Philipp, Thomas and Schumann, Christoph (eds.): From the Syrian Land to the States of Syria and Lebanon, Beirut 2004, pp. 163-73. ↑

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- [Ziadeh, Nicola: **A first-person account of the First World War in Greater Syria**, in: Farschid, Olaf / Kropp, Manfred / Dähne, Stephan \(eds.\): The First World War as remembered in the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean, Beirut; Würzburg 2006 Orient-Institut Beirut; Ergon in Kommission, pp. 265-277.](#)
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Citation

Najwa al-Qattan: Literature (Middle East), in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer D. Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2018-04-09.

DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.11235](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11235)

External Links

- [Farschid, Olaf / Kropp, Manfred / Dähne, Stephan \(eds.\): The First World War as Remembered in the Countries of the Eastern Mediterranean, Beirut 2006 \(Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Hamid, Lateef Wisam: The Impact of World War I on Middle East “Arabs” in Awwad’s “Al-Raghif”: A Cultural Perspective, in: Romanian Journal of English Studies 14, 2017 \(ResearchGate\) \(Article\)](#)

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Author Keywords

Famine; Poetry; Zajal; Food; Safarbarlik

GND Subject Headings

[Weltkrieg \[1914-1918, Motiv\] ; Literatur](#)

LC Subject Headings

[World War, 1914-1918--Literature and the war](#)

Rameau Subject Headings

[Guerre mondiale \(1914-1918\) -- Littérature et guerre](#)

Key Person(s)

[al-Faghghali, Asad Khoury](#); [al-Khoury, Beshara Abdallah](#); [Nu'aymah, Mīkhā'īl](#); [Arida, Nasib](#); [Jibran, Jibran Khalil](#); [Awwad, Tawfiq Yusuf](#); [Udwan, Mamduh](#); [Frayha, Anis](#); [Ziadeh, Nicola](#); [Cemal Paşa, Ahmed](#)

Key Location(s)

Title

Literature (Middle East)

Author(s)

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Article Type

Handbook Article

Classification Group

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